



niacro news

Reflections and new beginnings for NIACRO

Olwen bows out after 43 years



New CEO is named
Fiona Greene to take up post imminently



Our 5 Asks @50



Lived Experience Series
Giving voice to our service users

Welcome to the latest edition of NIACRO News!

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This is a very special edition as we reflect not only on the past year but also on our history and the legacy that has been created, not least by our Chief Executive Olwen Lyner, who has announced her retirement after almost 44 years with the organisation.

Olwen joined the organisation when there were just six staff. Today we employ 130 people and deliver 27 services, working with over 6,500 adults, families, children and young people.

After 21 years at the helm, this - the 45th edition of NIACRO News - will be the last that Olwen will contribute to as Chief Executive. On pages 4,5,6 and 7 we have a special feature and article from Olwen as she reflects on connections and relationships. As she says, "These connections have helped to provide better services to individuals, positioned us to make intelligent policy comment and enriched both the organisation and the staff."

This edition also heralds new beginnings as we introduce you to our incoming Chief Executive, our new Chair and new members of our Senior Leadership Team.

On Page 10, there's a brief introduction to the just newly-appointed incoming Chief Executive, Fiona Greene. Fiona is our current Director of Operations, a post she has held since May 2020. She will take up post of CEO on March 1st, 2022. Do look out for our next edition when Fiona will set out her vision for NIACRO.

Our new Chair needs little introduction to the sector. He is Les Allamby, the former Chief Commissioner of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. You can read his contribution inside.

In this packed edition, we will mark what has been a hugely successful year for the organisation when it picked up a number of awards, including scooping the title of 'Organisation of the Year' in The Howard League Awards.

The COVID pandemic has continued to disrupt society throughout 2021 but that has not deterred our efforts to effect real change in policy. Many of you will know that we unveiled our 5 asks @ 50 at our annual general meeting in November.

We also revived the campaign with other sectoral colleagues to lobby for a long overdue raising of the current age of criminal responsibility from 10 years of age, taking that ask into the heart of government with a launch in the Long Gallery at Parliament Buildings in November.

Nor have we allowed COVID to detract from our role in delivering vital services to those who need them when they need them. Integral to the work we do is helping, enabling and supporting the people we work with and their families. Their voices are central to that work and so we have given space in the magazine to them to share their experiences. We also focus on the work we are doing at the Visitors Centres at all three prison sites.

Volunteers are the lifeblood of any organisation and it is no different for NIACRO so we were delighted to be reaccredited as Investors in Volunteers (IiV) 2021. Children in care are six times more likely to be cautioned or convicted of a crime than other young people. We showcase some of the volunteers on our Independent Volunteer Scheme, who provide a befriending service for 10-18 year olds in foster residential or kinship care.

Breaking news – just as we went to print, we received confirmation that we had also been re-accredited with the Investing In Children Award. You can read more on page 27.

So, as we begin 2022, we look forward to your ongoing and vital support in our endeavours to make progress as we work to reduce crime and its impact on people and communities.

We hope you enjoy this issue and thanks for reading.

The Editor



Feedback

If you have feedback on any aspect of NIACRO News or would like to contribute to the next issue, please contact our Public Affairs and Communication department by emailing:

 pact@niacro.co.uk



Award winning year for NIACRO



2021 proved to be a highly successful year for the work of NIACRO to be recognised externally.

Not only did we win 'Organisation of the Year 2021' but we also picked up awards for our work on debt advice and harnessing technology to create immersive learning experiences.

In August, Advice NI and its members, including NIACRO, celebrated being named Debt Team of the Year in the UK.

The prestigious title was presented by the Institute of Money Advisers (IMA) who praised the team for its unwavering support for people dealing with debt in Northern Ireland while keeping focus on training and development.

In 2020-2021 Advice NI's Debt project offered support and solutions in 4,000 debt cases totalling over £25 million in business and personal debt.

In September we were one of two organisations named as the Howard League for Penal Reform's 'Organisation of the Year 2021' in its Community Awards.

Accepting our award at a virtual ceremony, Olwen Lyner, our Chief Executive, said:

"It is especially fitting that our work has been recognised in this, our 50th year. In 1972, NIACRO's founders set out a vision for a charitable organisation which would reduce crime and the impact it has on people and communities.

"50 years on, we have remained true to those values and to that vision in what is a contentious, demanding field of work. It is, however, hugely rewarding. Ours is a story of transformation. We know we have made a difference to the lives of thousands of men, women and children of all ages and life experiences.

"We have contributed to building strong and positive community life in Northern Ireland. And we have played our part in shaping public policy and helping to make change – for the better- to the criminal justice system here. And there is much more to be done.

"Special thanks today must go to our staff, Executive Committee, volunteers and to our funders who, together, make this work possible and continue to enable us to make a difference to the lives of those who come into contact with the criminal justice system."

And to round off the year, we picked up an award in December for our SITE IT project, a collaboration with Sentireal, CITB and funded by Ufi Trust, which is highlighted on Page 24. We won the Belfast Telegraph's 'Best Not for Profit IT Project' award.

The judges said: "NIACRO demonstrated innovative and excellent use of technology for training and rehabilitation of persons in prison with the aim of assisting them to find employment and reduce the likelihood of re-entering the prison system."

Main Photo: Ruth Walker, our Business Development Manager picks up the 'Belfast Telegraph's Best Not for Profit IT Project' award for our SITE IT project, from sponsor Alison McFadden of Continuum.

Photo Left: The ADVICE NI team picking up the award for 'Debt Team of the Year UK', including our own Donnchadh Murphy.





Connections and relationships provided better services and enriched organisations and staff

I feel very fortunate to be retiring from NIACRO having been able to contribute to the variety of publications that marked the 50th year of the organisation's existence.

All are notable and referenced at the bottom of this article. The most stretching was the article 'Mapping fifty years of NIACRO – Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders'. It was published in the Irish Probation Journal in November 2021 and was written alongside three long standing members of the organisation, Brendan Fulton, Shadd Maruna and Gillian McNaull .

We reproduce the abstract to whet your appetite and hope you will take time to read the article here: [04-IPJ-Vol-18-CL-Mapping-50-years-of-NIACRO.pdf](https://pbni.org.uk/04-IPJ-Vol-18-CL-Mapping-50-years-of-NIACRO.pdf) (pbni.org.uk)

"The year 2021 marks half a century of NIACRO's work, supporting people involved with criminal justice, and their families, as well as the wider community. Born in the first years of what became a 30-year violent conflict and operating in the criminal justice voluntary/community sector, NIACRO has survived through 50 turbulent years as one of Northern Ireland's largest crime-reduction and community-building organisations. This paper examines the lessons to be learnt from the longevity of this organisation, illustrating how the four qualities of responsivity, diversification, surety of mission and partnership working have

been central to NIACRO's resilience within an often-treacherous terrain of fluctuating funding. First, NIACRO has perceptively engaged with the complex local and national political landscape, and the ensuing criminal justice and social issues that emerged. Second, through diversification of services in response to changing penal policy, NIACRO has developed its vision and capacity to engage effectively with both statutory criminal justice and the voluntary and community sector. Third, NIACRO had at its foundation a core value of centring the needs of those in contact with criminal justice and did not drift from this mission. Finally, NIACRO was able to build organisational resilience over the decades through a network of partnerships, co-operation and co-production with community organisations and state agencies."

The paper examines four principles to which NIACRO has held fast over our long history and which we believe have contributed to our success:

- Engaging in the social and political landscape of the times
- Diversifying in line with developing research and penal policy - developing services in relation to employability; mentoring; financial

and housing support as well as engaging the families and children of those who have offended; then turning to necessary models of early intervention

- A surety of purpose and an avoidance of mission drift
- And finally, building responsible connections for those who need services through a wide range of partnerships

In developing the article, we (the authors) agreed that much more could have been said on each theme, but I take the opportunity in this, my last contribution to NIACRO News, to focus on the fourth and final point, that of connections and relationships.

A first point of illustration is the statutory organisations that have remained central to the focus of the organisation's mission and with whom NIACRO has developed strong and trusted services, alongside making associated policy comment. Notably the Probation Board for NI (PBNI) and the NI Prison Service (NIPS) have funded, partnered with, and supported us through the years, in many contexts. Over recent years, our staff have been embedded within their structures which has proved to be effective in facilitating access to our services for those most in need. It has certainly enabled us to deliver on our shared goals, supporting resettlement, and thereby contribute to crime reduction and less victimisation. Whilst arrangements had to be reworked in response to the challenge of the pandemic, this commitment has been as evident as ever.

The second is the engagements with our colleagues in the third sector. The reach that our staff have into many diverse voluntary and community groups in support of their clients' needs is enormous and leads to engagement with many themed organisations, by which I mean those with a focus on housing, accommodation, finance/debt, mental health, addictions, and support for family and other relationships. The list is endless and while we sometimes hear remarks that there are a lot of organisations about, as a believer in community development and empowerment, this richness of supply provides a creative tension.

NIACRO has for many years worked to bring organisations in this space together under the questionable (in desistance theory terms) title of ASFO - Accessing Services For Offenders. We are currently working to extend its reach to connect with others who would work with us.

At key moments we have worked with others in the third sector to raise concerns or provide shared reflection on the progress of a policy matter. A venture involving Prison Fellowship; Quaker Services; Start 360, Women's Support

Network (WSN) and NIACRO supported a series of workshops and seminars in 2013 that reflected on the progress of the Prison Review Team Final Report (2011) and exposed gaps that were not being addressed.

Recently, Include Youth; VOYPIC; Children's Law Centre and NIACRO have worked together to identify unfinished business in relation to the Youth Justice Review 2011.

In earlier years there were policy alignments with NAPO (National Association of Probation Officers) and ICPO (Irish Commission for Prisoners Overseas) on the issue of the Transfer of Prisoners and later an interagency group on the needs of the children of prisoners engaged, amongst others PBNI; NIPS; Barnardo's; Quaker Services and Prison Fellowship.

There was and remains much to be gained by these policy collaborations.

Relations with community-based organisations are also critical. In the article referenced at the start we track NIACRO's own work in communities and recognise the important role that community plays in our lives. For those of us working with criminal justice, the support that community facilities offer i.e., women's centres; local training organisations; community advice and wellbeing services is essential. Especially relevant for NIACRO are the relations with the restorative justice organisations that we currently partner with in the delivery of Aspire Community Engagement namely NI Alternatives and CRJI (Community Restorative Justice Ireland). Similarly, our role in Family Support Hubs and our leadership of the Portadown based hub alongside our partnership with the Newry based organisation Bolster in the delivery of the Southern Trust's Early Intervention Support Service (EISS funded by PHA) is a current example of healthy partnership working with local communities.

These connections have helped to provide better services to individuals, positioned us to make intelligent policy comment and have enriched both the organisations and staff members who are working together on a range of issues. I have been privileged to be involved in many more than I have referenced here, but to all those I have engaged with in my various roles in NIACRO, I know that together we were more than the sum of our parts and I thank you for the opportunity to work with you and wish you all the best for the future.

Olwen

END OF AN ERA: **Olwen Lyner bows out after 43 years**

Olwen Lyner is the current NIACRO Chief Executive and has spent most of her life working for the organisation, 21 of those in the top post. She will retire in February after 43 years of service to NIACRO and to public life.



An English Literature graduate, Olwen joined NIACRO in 1978 as one of a small team of 6. Over four decades later, she oversees an organisation that employs 130 staff across 27 projects and supports almost 7000 people, families, young people and children.

Olwen's contribution to NIACRO has been remarkable. Yet, her leadership has not remained just within the confines of NIACRO. She chairs NICVA and is a board member there and is also a member of think tank, Pivotal.

“Olwen has been a hero and mentor for many of us.”

To mark our 50th year and Olwen's departure, we recorded an interview with her in which she reflects on the changes and challenges within the criminal justice sector and the organisation. You can listen to it on our YouTube channel here: youtu.be/o3JYImB2Tcg

For this edition, Seamus McAleavey, Chief Executive of NICVA - an organisation which Olwen chairs – pays tribute to Olwen and her long career underpinned by social justice and selflessness.

He said:

“As ‘retirement’ beckons we can look back on an extraordinary 44-year career primarily focussed on working to reduce crime and the impact it has on people and communities. The retirement is really about the day job as Olwen has lots more to do.

“Joining NIACRO all those years ago, it was a small relatively new organisation with just six staff. It has grown into a household name in the voluntary and community sector employing 130 people now. The organisation does extraordinary work helping

individuals and their families turn their lives around.

“Over 50 years in existence NIACRO has firmly maintained its focus and avoided mission drift. Olwen's firm belief has been that with more services available to people at the right time, fewer people would enter the criminal justice system. Put simply prevention is always better than cure.

“NIACRO has always believed in researching the issues, establishing the evidence and making the case for better services and policy intervention and this has had a big impact over 50 years.

“Olwen is absolutely honest and direct. She doesn't hide a difficult or challenging message and she's also entirely comfortable to tell her board and colleagues when things haven't worked out or they haven't got done.”

“Olwen's work has always been driven by a sense of social justice, combatting the impact of poverty on young people's life chances and opportunities.

“She has brought those values to a wider selfless role for voluntary and community organisations in Northern Ireland beyond her role as Chief Executive of NIACRO. As Chair and Board member of NICVA she has represented all the organisations collectively rather than her own organisation alone.

“Even before becoming a board member at NICVA, she was often picked to take part in critical meetings with Ministers, and others, because we could depend on her taking that wider perspective. She believes in social solidarity, is guided by those values and practices it in her engagement.”

Seamus added: "When she steps down from NIACRO she will continue as Chair of NICVA using her talent and experience to the benefit of wider voluntary action. Her 44-year career demonstrates that active citizens can make a difference to improve lives and create better opportunities for communities.



What an achievement! What a legacy!

"It takes great leadership to provide the direction and focus required for such a successful organisation, which is why I was so very sad to hear the news of Olwen's plans to retire from her long-standing role in NIACRO after 21 years steering the organisation and 43 years of service to NIACRO and in public life.

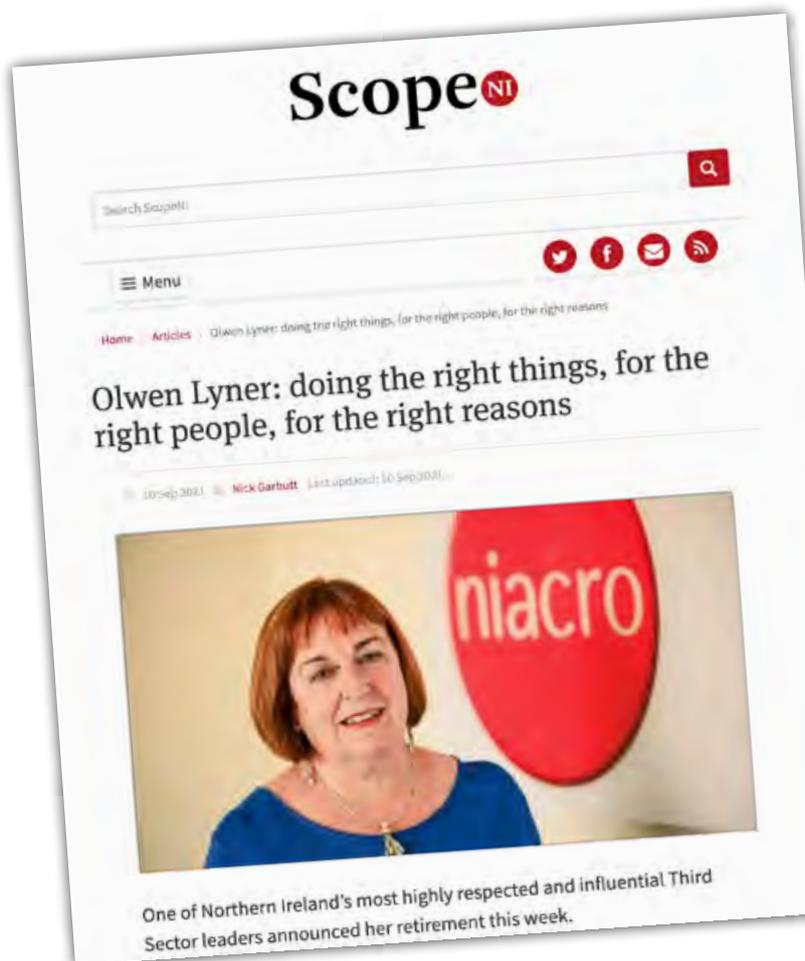
"What an achievement! And what a legacy. To have such a long career devoted to supporting and advocating for those in contact with the justice system.

"I know personally of the commitment Olwen has given to NIACRO, and to the community, and there is no doubt that Northern Ireland is a better place because of her dedication to her job her mentorship of her teams, and the people in contact with justice who needed her the most.

"I think we can all say that we will sincerely miss Olwen at NIACRO. So, from myself, on behalf of the Departments and its agencies, and all of our officials who have worked so closely with her over the years, I want to take this opportunity to wish Olwen all the very best of luck in all of her future endeavours."

"Olwen is also a Trustee of Pivotal a small local think tank, again focussing on research, evidence and searching for solutions to public policy problems. I predict a very active and engaged 'retirement'."

"Olwen has been a giant for many of us, I would have been a less successful leader if it had not been for her guidance."



"Finally in a space that is complex, contentious and difficult Olwen has held on to the rights and the potential of people with lived experience of the criminal justice system. Not only has she believed in the need for 2nd and 3rd and 4th chances but, more than that, she has delivered those chances."



Former Human Rights Commissioner is new NIACRO Chair

I am delighted to have joined NIACRO's Executive Committee and to have become its Chair following the recent AGM.

I have worked with NIACRO throughout my career, first as a legal adviser and director of Law Centre NI, and then in my role as the Chief Commissioner of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission up until the end of August 2021.

What I have always admired about the organisation is its values including a commitment to user involvement and its practice, particularly the recognition that the experience of delivering services must be fed into policy development to ensure progressive social change for those at risk of coming into contact with the criminal justice system. Moreover, NIACRO has worked in a field which is often publicly and politically unpopular without resiling from its values or principles.

The 5 Asks at 50 – NIACRO's policy priorities for the coming year – is just one example. Alongside effective resourcing of early intervention services, raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility, addressing delays in the criminal justice system and reducing the use of remand is the demand to undertake an urgent review of the Rehabilitation of Offenders legislation.

From my time at the Human Rights Commission, I know of the value of NIACRO's knowledge and expertise first hand. The Commission has challenged the provision that

any sentence over 30 months can never be 'spent' and must be declared to employers, insurers, educational institutions and many others. The rules apply regardless of the offence or the job applied for. Separate rules apply for regulated employment, for example working with children.

'Moreover, NIACRO has worked in a field which is often publicly and politically unpopular without resiling from its values or principles'

Les Allamby, Chair

The challenge was that the current law is contrary to Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights (the right to private and family life), in that there are no arrangements for review to look at the specific circumstances of any case. The law in Northern Ireland is significantly different from England, Wales and Scotland. Following reform there, convictions of over four years must be declared throughout the rest of an individual's life. For England and Wales, a recent White Paper published by the Ministry of Justice – 'A Smarter Approach to Sentencing' - is proposing a rehabilitation period of the length

of the sentence, plus seven years for individuals sentenced to prison for over four years. This is subject to excluding those convicted of serious sexual, violent and terrorist offences. These proposals recognise the value of employment and obtaining business and other insurance.

On 1 November, Mr Justice Colton held that Article 6(1) of the Rehabilitation of Offenders Order (NI) 1978 which states that a conviction of over 30 months can never be spent is not compatible with human rights because of the lack of a review mechanism regardless of the passage of time and the individual's personal circumstances.

Critical to building the case was evidence supplied by NIACRO and Unlock who both provided additional real-life examples of how the current law impacts on job prospects, access to training, finding accommodation, and travel. Moreover, NIACRO also set out research from the Ministry of Justice showing that after seven years, people sentenced to four or more years are no more likely to re-offend than the general population. The ability to show the direct practical impact of legislation is vital in any legal argument. The judgment quoted NIACRO's affidavit on how criminal convictions can produce barriers beyond employment to many other areas of personal and public life.

The Commission's judicial review and NIACRO's contribution has yielded one result already. In January 2021 the Department of Justice published a consultation paper on 'proposals to reform rehabilitation periods in Northern Ireland'. The paper did not offer any specific proposals, instead it asked broad based questions to see if there was an appetite for reform. Nonetheless, if any changes are made to the rehabilitation period of 30 months, it will be the first time it has been done since the introduction of the legislation over 40 years ago. While the Department could, of course appeal, nonetheless, the judgment now places the ball in the Department's court to bring forward legislative change early in the next Assembly mandate.

The ability of NIACRO to deliver important services alongside working on a meaningful contribution to policy development is one of the reasons I am honoured to become its Chair.

Death of first NIACRO Director, Michael Warden

We are saddened to hear of the passing of NIACRO's first ever Director, Michael Warden.

Michael left his career in education where he was leader of the NACRO Education Project to join us to serve as our Director from 1979 until 1986, following a governance review that had created the post.

Michael was tasked with developing the organisation's menu of services. His creative style and ability to connect with people provided a great platform for organisational development.

Alongside service development, Michael's interest and commitment to developing a policy perspective for the organisation enabled us to undertake research into 'Unemployment and the Young Offended' in 1981. This work ultimately unlocked resources to develop NIACRO's first employment related offering.

And in 1984 he commissioned work into those young men who were convicted of murders that had occurred while they had been under 18.

In his final annual report, Michael wrote:

"We take our stand on helping people to manage the transition from involvement with the criminal justice system, for whatever reason and whatever their attitudes to it, to the outside community".

After leaving NIACRO, Michael remained in contact with us as a lifetime member.

He is survived by his wife Jan and three sons.





Meet Fiona Greene, our new Chief Executive

NIACRO is delighted that Fiona Greene has been appointed as our new Chief Executive.

Fiona has been our Director of Operations from May 2020 and will take up her new post as Chief Executive Officer (CEO) on March 1st 2022, replacing outgoing CEO Olwen Lyner.

Fiona has a wealth of experience having worked in the community and voluntary sector for almost 28 years.

A law graduate, she is the former Director of Care for Northern Ireland Chest, Heart & Stroke where she was the senior lead for all services and client programmes, and previous to that was Policy and Strategy Manager with Victim Support NI.

Fiona has served on various voluntary boards including as Chair of the Long-Term Conditions Alliance NI, and is currently a board member with the Law Centre NI.

She said: “The work of NIACRO is challenging, rewarding and vital; it is a privilege to have this opportunity to lead the NIACRO team to deliver our mission.

“I would take this moment to thank Olwen for everything she has achieved for this organisation, and for the personal difference she has made to each and every one of us who have had the honour of working with her.

“I am excited to lead our dedicated, innovative and value driven team into the future.”

Meet Patrick Anderson

Patrick is our Working Well Manager and new member of our Senior Leadership Team.

Patrick joined the organisation in January 2021 having previously worked in the community and voluntary sector, as well as having a career in education as a former Sociology and Psychology teacher.

“Stigma, and how it affects people’s behaviour, especially that of men, has been an area of interest of mine for a long time.

“Whilst completing a BA in Sociology, my research focused on the extent to which the stigma placed on marginalised groups increased the chance of risk taking and offending behaviour.

“This further heightened my discomfort with the lack of equality that exists amongst so many walks of life, and I have always felt a strong sense of responsibility to use the voice I have to help those who have not yet had the support or courage to find theirs.

“I have come to NIACRO bringing my strong values base, as well as my experience in project

management, leadership, and strategic development, which has grown throughout my time working within formal education as a teacher of Sociology and Psychology, and in service development and management within the voluntary and community sector.

“I, like most, did not come to NIACRO fully formed; indeed I was attracted to the strength of leadership and experience that exists, and I have continued to learn and grow from those around me at all levels of the organisation.”



Meet Ciara Corrigan

Ciara Corrigan is our new Programme Manager for Children, Family and Women’s services and new member of our Senior Leadership team.

Ciara studied social work at Ulster University, as well as completing her Masters. She comes to NIACRO with a wealth of experience, having worked in the voluntary and community sector for 14 years.

Ciara started her social work career working as a social worker in an adult mixed hostel. Then moved to begin working with children, young people and families in the early intervention and prevention arena. She has managed different family and young people services, both in early intervention and latterly in prevention and safeguarding. She has also written on the topic for a social work publication.

“I am delighted to have taken on the role as Programme Manager in Children, Family and Women’s Services within NIACRO. It has been amazing to meet staff and service users across the teams. I am keen to continue with supporting them in this vital work.”





Decade of delay on key youth justice recommendations

Children’s rights in Northern Ireland are being compromised by a failure to implement youth justice review recommendations

That was the key message when NIACRO and its partners officially launched *‘Tracing the Review: Developments in Youth Justice in Northern Ireland’* in Parliament Buildings in November.

The new expert led research report was jointly commissioned by ourselves, the Children’s Law Centre, Include Youth and VOYPIC - Voice of Young People in Care.

The independent research was conducted by Dr Siobhan McAlister and Dr Nicola Carr, experts in the field of youth justice and tracks the progress of several key recommendations made a decade ago in the Youth Justice Review.

The new report draws particular attention to the lack of progress in relation to raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility, a key recommendation from the Youth Justice Review. It also outlines a number of key findings, including the need to ensure compliance with children’s rights and human rights standards.

Chief Executive, Olwen Lyner, chaired the event which was attended by the Justice Minister, Naomi Long, and sponsored by the Chair of the Justice Committee, Mervyn Storey, MLA.

She called for legislation to be brought forward to give effect to all aspects of Recommendation 21 of the Youth Justice Review, with respect to criminal records.

Olwen said: “This is particularly the case with respect to recommendation 21a of the Review “to ensure diversionary disposals do not attract a criminal record or be subject to employer or more general disclosure”.

“Indeed, the recent judgment in relation to the judicial review on the Rehabilitation of Offenders and the necessary policy consultation that will follow, gives an opportunity for these issues to be dealt with.”

TRACING THE REVIEW DEVELOPMENTS IN YOUTH JUSTICE IN NORTHERN IRELAND 2011-2021

“The Executive, key government departments and criminal justice bodies should ensure compliance with children’s rights standard that custody should only be used as a measure of last resort.”

Dr. Paula Rodgers
Include Youth Policy Co-ordinator

Logos: QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY BELFAST, CENTRE FOR CHILDREN'S RIGHTS, University of Nottingham, VOYPIC, Include YOUTH, niacro

TRACING THE REVIEW DEVELOPMENTS IN YOUTH JUSTICE IN NORTHERN IRELAND 2011-2021

“The UNCRC has now recommended that the minimum age of criminal responsibility should be 16 years. The Executive should ensure that the MACR is raised to achieve compliance with international children’s rights standards as a matter of urgency.”

Paddy Kelly
Children’s Law Centre Director

Logos: QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY BELFAST, CENTRE FOR CHILDREN'S RIGHTS, University of Nottingham, VOYPIC, Include YOUTH, niacro

Paddy Kelly, Director at the Children’s Law Centre said: “In this jurisdiction, we have one of the lowest ages of criminal responsibility in Europe, and indeed the world. The recommendation to raise the age of criminal responsibility is one of the key elements of the Youth Justice Review ten years ago but it has remained unimplemented. The UNCRC clearly recommends raising the age to 16 and the NI Executive has a duty to comply with UNCRC obligations. We cannot cherry pick children’s rights.



“Failure to raise the age has serious real world impacts on vulnerable children. Rather than addressing the failures that have pushed young people towards the criminal justice system, we are criminalising them. This in turn can have lifelong negative impacts, both on the children affected and the criminal justice system itself.”



Dr Paula Rodgers, Policy Co-Ordinator at Include Youth said: “The overuse of remand and the placement of children into custody remains areas of concern. The recommendations of the Review concerning the development of alternatives to custodial remand have not been brought forward, and such lack of alternatives remain a fundamental weakness in provision.

“Whilst numbers are small the simple fact is one young person held in custody is one too many. A further concern is that care experienced young people are disproportionately represented in these numbers and this is something that needs to change as a matter of urgency.”



And Alicia Toal, Chief Executive at VOYPIC, said: “Whilst overall numbers of children and young people held in custody have declined, we are concerned that children and young people from care continue to be over-represented amongst those on remand and in custody under PACE provisions. Compliance with children’s rights standards would ensure that custody is only used as a measure of last resort. This report highlights the need for urgent action from the Executive, to ensure better outcomes for all children across the region.”

Main Photo: Dr Paula Rodgers, Olwen Lyner, Paul McCafferty and Paddy Kelly at the launch of Tracing the Review at Parliament Buildings.

TRACING THE REVIEW DEVELOPMENTS IN YOUTH JUSTICE IN NORTHERN IRELAND 2011-2021

“The Executive should bring forward legislation to give effect to all aspects of recommendation 21 of the Youth Justice Review and recommendations of UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, in relation to criminal records. In particular this includes recommendation 21a of Youth Justice Review to ensure diversionary disposals do not attract a criminal record or be subject to employer or more general disclosure.”

Olwen Lyner
NIACRO, Chief Executive

TRACING THE REVIEW DEVELOPMENTS IN YOUTH JUSTICE IN NORTHERN IRELAND 2011-2021

“The Executive should ensure that a comprehensive Early Intervention Strategy is at the heart of the Programme for Government, is adopted as a cross-departmental commitment and is properly resourced.”

Alicia Toal
VOYPIC, Chief Executive

Marking half a century of changing lives at our 50th AGM

2021 marks half a century of NIACRO's work, supporting people involved with criminal justice, and their families, as well as the wider community.

Born in the first years of what became a 30-year violent conflict and operating in the criminal justice voluntary/community sector, NIACRO has survived through 50 turbulent years as one of Northern Ireland's key crime-reduction third sector organisations.

To mark the year, we held a very special annual general meeting in October, chaired by our outgoing Chair Majella McCloskey, where we heard from staff and service users.

She told those gathered virtually: "NIACRO's story is of all the people – staff, volunteers, and Executive Committee and those who use its services – who have always worked with the values of the organisation in their hearts. At this 50-year point, it's a privilege to lead an organisation that reflects on and learns from the past and plans but lives and works each day making an important contribution to changing policy and changing lives.



It was also the last annual general meeting that would be presided over by our current Chief Executive Olwen Lyner, who announced her intention to retire. Olwen steps down in February after 21 years at the helm.

"Surveying the 50 years tells the story of a voluntary organisation working in a contentious, demanding but very rewarding field. We know we have made a difference to the lives of thousands of individuals of all ages and life experiences; contributed to building strong

niacro 5 ASKS AT 50
Effective resourcing of early intervention programmes and services

niacro 5 ASKS AT 50
Raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility

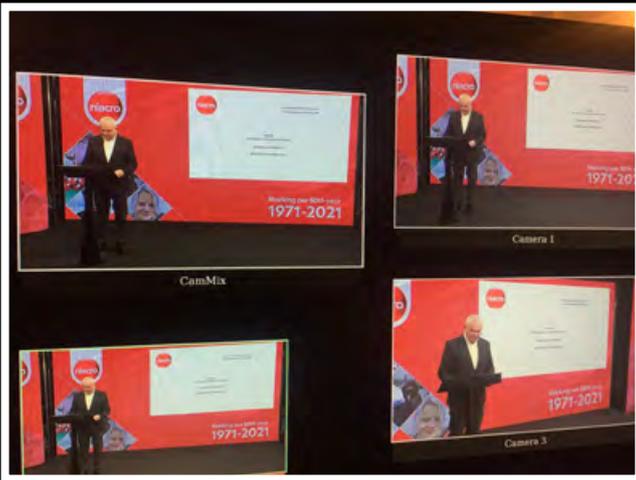
niacro 5 ASKS AT 50
Address delays in the Criminal Justice system

niacro 5 ASKS AT 50
Reduce the use of remand supported by enhanced alternatives

niacro 5 ASKS AT 50
An urgent review of the Rehabilitation of Offenders (NI) Order 1978

and positive community life in many parts of Northern Ireland; and played our part in shaping public policy.

"We haven't succeeded in everything we've tried to do and there have been times when we've felt under siege, but all the time we have been building up experience and learning how to do our work better. This has included seeing when it's right to revisit what we are doing and change tack if that makes it more likely we'll achieve our goals.



"Reviewing the 50 years points to not only how much NIACRO has grown but also how flexible the organisation has been in adapting to the needs and circumstances of people with convictions, their families, and their communities."

And she added: "Finally, as I close can I thank all staff in all roles for everything they have done, often differently this year, to deliver services and keep the lights on and to thank the Executive committee, those current and those who have gone before, for supporting me in the reality of a job and role that has been so rewarding and now so difficult to leave."

At the AGM, we also launched our 5 Asks @ 50, setting out our policy concerns for the time ahead.

And Tony Glover, our Treasurer did some 'creative' accounting as he gave his take on what the finances may have looked like back in 1972. That was before getting to the business proper and setting out the actual finances for the year 2021/2022.

The AGM was closed with a special address from the Justice Minister, Naomi Long, to mark not only our 50 years but also the retirement of Olwen Lyner.

Minister looks forward to forging the road ahead with NIACRO

Justice Minister Naomi Long gave a special recorded address to those who had gathered for our 50th annual general meeting in November.

She said:

"I think we can all agree it is an achievement for any organisation to be in a position to mark its 50th year.

"Northern Ireland was a very different place in 1971 but despite those challenging times, NIACRO succeeded in not only establishing itself, but continuing to serve the community with a growing portfolio of services in pursuit of your mission statement – to reduce crime on the impact of people and communities across Northern Ireland.

"Throughout your history, NIACRO has thrived through partnership working to enhance and build upon your success. I am pleased to say the Department has formed a close working relationship with you over the last two decades and your engagement with criminal justice organisations spans your lifetime in Northern Ireland.

"I often find that these annual events are an opportunity to reflect on the journey travelled over the last year. Never mind looking at the road travelled over the last 50.

"However, at this time there is no doubt that the last year, and indeed the last 18 months, have brought enormous and fresh challenges for us all. However, I think the annual report, launched here today, is testament to how NIACRO has managed to adapt to changing circumstances and, at all times, still striven to deliver a quality service. Indeed, when partners were not able to enter prison establishments, NIACRO sought opportunities to make an impact remotely and with the families of those in the care of the prison service.

"I believe it is this resilience, flexibility and drive that has earned NIACRO the recent Howard League award for Organisation of the Year.

"And finally, I want to congratulate NIACRO for their first 50 years, and look forward to working with you forging the road ahead."



Lived Experiences: Those we work with share their stories*

As NIACRO marks its 50th year, we wanted to ensure that the voices and experiences of those who use, and are central to our services, are heard.

In those 50 years, our work has helped change the lives of thousands of people. So, we have captured and recorded the stories of some of those who come to us, often times when they are in greatest need, and the impact our work has on those who come into contact with the criminal justice system.

But don't take our word for it. Please make some time to hear their stories.

Gerard* speaks about the support and help offered to him by the ASPIRE programme when he faced issues of debt, homelessness, drugs and mental health.

Mary* about her 30-year experience of having a criminal conviction from the age of 18 and how her work with the disclosure team has helped her change the future; Anne* about going to prison as an older woman and then finding

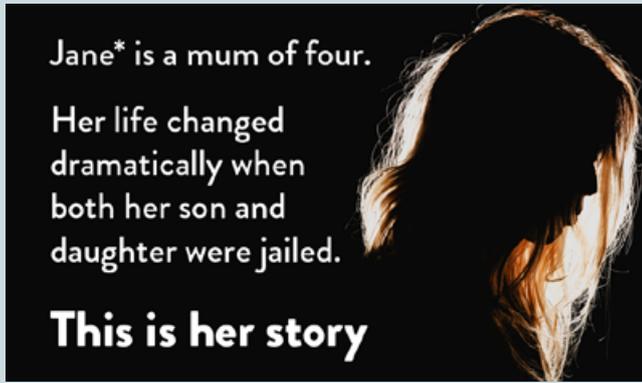
purpose with our Women's Group; Jane* on the emotional and practical support offered to her when both her children went to prison at the same time. And finally, John* who had to tell his 12-year-old son he was going to prison.

We would like to thank all of those who contributed to the Lived Experiences series, which included recorded interviews which are hosted on our YouTube site and can also be found on our Twitter account @niacro and to those who agreed to share their story at our 50th annual general meeting.

Thanks also to the many others who have taken the step to share their stories with others or agreed that we can give voice to them in our engagements with policy makers, elected representatives, funders, partners and the public.

These are their stories:

* All names have been changed



JANE

Jane is a mother of four. She tells how her life changed forever when both her son and daughter were in prison at the same time, both having suffered from PTSD.

Her son, now a recovering heroin addict, received a 17-month prison sentence. He started taking drugs as a teenager after being kidnapped and beaten by paramilitaries.

Her 24-year-old daughter, a mum of two, turned to drink and drugs after being in an extremely violent relationship. She received a 20-month prison sentence.

Jane, a lone parent, now looks after four children under the age of 9, including her grandchildren. She says both of her children regarded their time in prison as a means of recovery. As a family, they are all looking forward to a brighter future.

She says of NIACRO:

"I can honestly say they were a saviour for me, financially as well. They helped me out so much. I needed that support because I had nobody.

"My mother died in the middle of all this, so that was quite hard as well, I lost my best friend, I didn't really have anyone to turn to. NIACRO were always there for me. It was amazing.

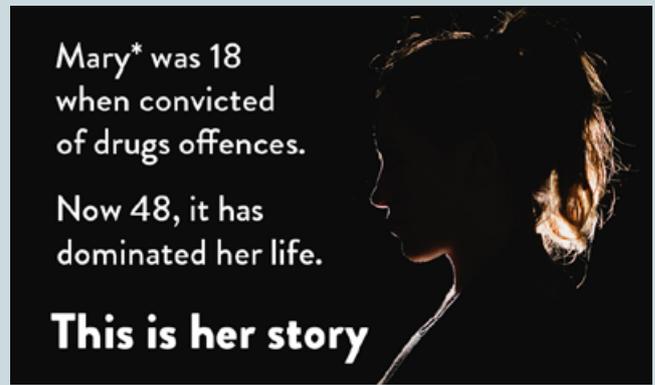
"Mentally, they were there as well for me, knowing there was someone there to help you and who understood. Not everyone understands when you have drug addicts as children, they just look down at you but that's one thing they never ever did.

"NIACRO were an absolute godsend. They took me out for dinner and I was treated like a queen and it was something I had never ever got because you don't go out to a big restaurant on your own and I have usually got the kids, So it was people like myself, their children were either in jail or just out of jail or partners were in jail.

So we were all in the same boat so I was really comfortable and relaxing because nobody was looking at you saying 'what are you doing here?'

You can hear Jane's story on <https://youtu.be/4HMTZI9o3dc>

Our Family Links team Family Links | NIACRO



MARY

Mary* is now 48 years old. In 1994, when she was 18-years old, she was convicted of a drug offence (she and three friends had 4 LSD 'tabs' between them). 27 years on, it remains on her record and has dominated most of her life.

With NIACRO's help, Mary made a successful appeal to the Independent Reviewer and was able to keep her job as a carer. She had lost so many jobs over the years due to her conviction that she felt suicidal when she called our helpline.

She now runs her own business and was about to get married when we spoke to her.

In a searingly honest and emotional interview she recalls how she came to us in her darkest hour.

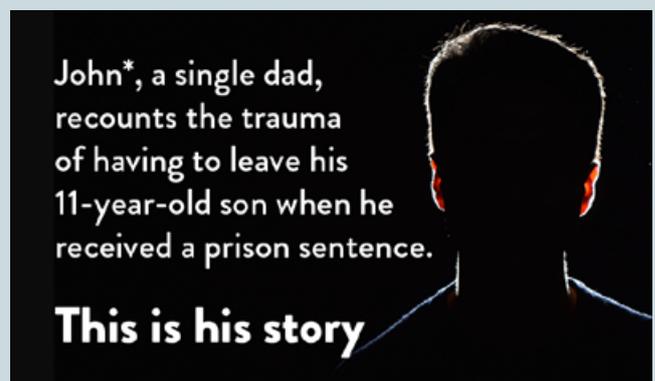
"In all honestly, NIACRO is the reason I am alive today.

You can hear her story by listening here: https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLaq2cpuliKxTQftDAoKEU8gSnEs_5VVyA

<https://youtu.be/6wBdhNCxjFw>

Working Well | NIACRO

Lived Experiences: Mary* - YouTube



JOHN

John* related the overwhelming first and only experience of going to prison for himself and his 12-year old son.

He speaks of the hope and understanding he gained, thanks to his contact with NIACRO.

"I had never been in trouble in my life and never imagined I would ever go to prison. My son has never been involved with the whole judicial system so we found it a little bit overwhelming at the very start.

"Once the visit had taken place and the involvement from NIACRO, we felt that it gave us hope and a better understanding as to what was going to go on once I had gone away.

"I wasn't aware how long I was going to go to prison for but I was told I would be going for a period of incarceration. My son was 12 and I found it quite difficult to come to terms with how you explain to a young boy you're not going to be around for a period of time, and you don't know how long it's going to be.

"NIACRO was a friendly voice through times of trouble & consequence. We were better prepared asking NIACRO to get involved, it was essential for us to have a better future."

You can hear the full interview with John here: <https://youtu.be/dzYpw70Rlp4>



ANNE

Anne went to prison as an older woman.

In her remarkable interview she tells us that the criminal justice system saved her life and of the impact of joining NIACRO's Women's Group.

"Prison was the start of me finding me. And a value and a place in society and a place in life. It gave me a freedom, from press, the history, the person who I was with, it just gave me opportunity to move on with my life.

"Six months before I was released, I was introduced to NIACRO and that was the start of getting out into the community, and taking on little things, like going on the bus, walking through the town. Going to NIACRO was very important in my step outside the prison and getting back into the community and just even actually walking in a door with complete strangers.

"I was in a safe environment where I knew that if I opened my mouth and said something that I wasn't going to be shut down and I wasn't going to feel inferior and everybody in a way was equal in there. I just felt as if I found a voice, I found even friends, and just really looked forward to every week that we were together and all the experiences it brought into play was unbelievable."

You can hear the full interview here: https://youtu.be/_PclyNzOwPo

If you'd like more details on NIACRO's Women's project, visit [The Women's Project | NIACRO](#)

GERARD

"My worker gave me a lot of support when I was stuck in a bad situation with debt, homelessness and my marriage breakdown, drugs and mental health problems that I could not see any way out of.

"They helped me breakdown each issue and what could be done to resolve it bit by bit. They came to visit me and met me face-to-face, as well as giving support on the phone. They introduced me to other professionals who provided more specialist support about legally clearing my debts so I could have hope for the future

"They listened to me when I was having issues - with my marriage breakdown and after I had experienced a major bereavement - that were having a major impact on my mental health and helped me get the support about these.

"They also spoke to my mum with my agreement and made me feel better that I was getting support."

The ASPIRE programme helps young men aged 16-30 years old develop their full capacity. You can find out more here: <https://niacro.co.uk/aspire-mentoring-services>

Gerard's interview can be listened to on Lived Experiences: Gerard* - YouTube

NIACRO News - 50th Anniversary Edition Lived Experiences interviews:

Anne* https://youtu.be/_PclyNzOwPo

Jane* <https://youtu.be/4HMTZ19o3dc>

Mary* <https://youtu.be/6wBdhNCxjFw>

John* <https://youtu.be/dzYpw70Rlp4>



As we mark our 50th year and in the absence of the capacity to run events, NIACRO took a decision to do a root and branch review of the key policy asks that the organisation has at this 50-year point.

Everyone got involved and this is the result, our 5 policy asks at 50



Effective Resourcing of Early Intervention Programmes and Services

Early intervention works on the principle of intervening at an early age and/or stage to help children to develop the skills they need to live happy, healthy, and successful lives, and work to reduce the negative impacts of disadvantage. Evaluations of EITP's contribution indicated that the programme was, overall, making a significant contribution to children and family life.

The Children & Young People's Strategy, 2020-2030 references its success and the need for early intervention, and children and young people living in poverty are highlighted within several of its 'areas of greatest focus'. Yet, no explicit commitment is made within this or other Executive publications to resourcing a comprehensive early intervention programme over future years.

On the principles of justice reinvestment, that safer societies are formed by stronger families and communities, NIACRO wants to see an Executive led, inter-departmental commitment to:

1. Resourcing a comprehensive early intervention programme over future years

And

2. Resourcing the tackling of educational underachievement through resourcing the recommendations of the Expert Panel report, a Fair Start.

This is vital to enable children, young people, and whole families to thrive and in turn the wider community.



We want to see Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility raised

Northern Ireland's Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility is set at 10 years old and is one of the lowest in Europe.

The recommendation to raise the age is one of the key elements of the Youth Justice Review in 2011 that has remained unimplemented.

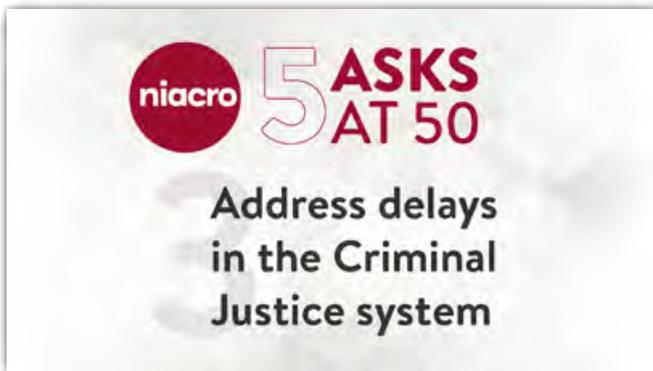
All three of Northern Ireland's Justice Ministers have publicly supported raising MACR in line with international standards. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommends that the minimum age of criminal responsibility should be up to 16 years.

Movement on the minimum age in some other jurisdictions is evident. However, despite the UNCRC recommendation, MACR in NI has remained unchanged and is in clear contravention of children's rights standards.

Raising MACR would:

- Remove significant numbers of children entering the criminal justice system
- Support the expansion of evidence-based Early Intervention Services and programmes, ensuring that the needs of children and young people are met before they ever have to enter the criminal justice system
- Ensure children and young people are supported and not punished
- Demonstrate a commitment to trauma informed practice, as well as an understanding of the underlying causes of offending, and the role of brain development as demonstrated by research.

We need to see movement on this key issue



Delays in the Criminal Justice System are addressed

When criminal justice does not perform effectively it can have a significant adverse impact on the lives of those involved: victims, defendants, witnesses, and their families. It also wastes significant amounts of public monies which could be more productively spent elsewhere in the justice system.

A key feature of how the system in Northern Ireland has operated has been a failure to complete cases within reasonable timescales. In 2019/2020, the median time taken for cases to be dealt with from the date of the offence until a verdict is delivered is 72 days for a Magistrates' Court case, 410 days for a Crown Court case and 698 days where the case involved a sexual offence.

The key causes of delay are weaknesses in the early stages of investigations.

The progress of cases through the system is punctuated by practices and processes that are not efficient and work against timely delivery

of justice. This has a significant impact on the quality of service to citizens and impacts upon the confidence of the public in the system's effectiveness.

In England and Wales custody time limits were introduced on the statute book in 1991. Custody time limits set out the maximum time a person can be held in custody during the pre-trial stage of criminal proceedings. If the time limit expires the person must be released on bail unless the prosecution applies to extend the time limit. The time limits vary depending on the type of the offence and the court dealing with the matter.

The issue of delays has been highlighted by several reviews.

To date no such reform has been introduced while delays remain unchecked. NIACRO believes the time has come to introduce legislation to implement custodial time limits. In parallel with this, specific reform projects should be initiated to reduce unnecessary adjournments and delays in processing cases.

It is reassuring that the issue is the focus of attention for many, and we want to contribute as we have in the past to take a solution focused approach to this wicked issue.



We want a Reduction in the Use of Remand, supported by Enhanced Bail Alternatives

The number and percentage of people in prison is rising. In 2020/21 nearly half of women prisoners were on remand, while men on remand made up over a third.

Being remanded into custody before trial can have many negative consequences for the individual concerned, their household, and

employers. It has consequences for finances, employment, housing, and family relationships. It is also challenging for the Prison Service, to offer suitable meaningful activity for people on remand.

NIACRO is aware of instances in which magistrates remand defendants (particularly women) into custody rather than release on bail because there are no suitable or safe options for accommodation and support for the person in the community. This tendency to use prison as a 'place of safety' is of particular concern, further traumatising, criminalising, and stigmatising people and leading to considerable personal & family, economic and practical upheaval.

Without better accommodation and bail support options for men and women, NIACRO is concerned that magistrates will have no option other than continue the current practice of remanding people into custody before trial.

We need to see focus on this issue significantly.



An Urgent Review of The Rehabilitation of Offenders (NI) Order 1978

Helping people with convictions to contribute to and feel included in society is key to reducing reoffending. Employment is just one way to achieve this and a considerable proportion of NIACRO's work involves supporting people to gain qualifications and prepare for employment.

The Rehabilitation of Offenders (NI) Order 1978 was introduced to give people a chance to 'make a fresh start' allowing for certain convictions to become 'spent' after a given period; and not needing to be declared when applying for employment, further and higher education, insurance, travel visas etc.

The 1978 Order was based on equivalent legislation passed in 1974 in England and Wales which was reviewed in 2014, with many rehabilitation periods in England and Wales being reduced. The Northern Ireland legislation has never had such a substantial review. Instead, amendments over the years have resulted in an increasing number of job sectors and roles being subject to disclosure of criminal records.

The concept of 'spent convictions' has been effectively removed from roles requiring more than a Basic Access NI check.

Furthermore, no checks and balances exist to prevent discrimination on the grounds of having a criminal record even when the offence is not relevant to the role. Moreover, an employer can ask at any stage during recruitment or after appointment for a Basic Access NI check.

NIACRO believes the 1978 legislation requires an urgent, significant review, to include:

1. Consideration of a two-part rehabilitation period made up of (a) the length of the sentence and (b) a buffer period, already in legislation in England, Wales, and Scotland.
2. Reductions and/or eradication of rehabilitation periods relating to the disposal of fines and Community Orders.
3. A mechanism for people who have served sentences of imprisonment lasting more than thirty months (currently excluded from rehabilitation) to apply for their conviction to become spent after a determined period, for example through the offices of the Independent Reviewer in Northern Ireland.
4. Complementary to these recommendations NIACRO would also suggest a separate equality legislation to protect people with criminal records from undue discrimination that falls outside of reasonable safeguarding measures.

That's why we are so pleased about the judicial review decision to a case taken by the NI Human Rights Commission, and supported by Unlock and ourselves, which was published in October confirming the view that the current stance is in breach of Article 8 (right to private and family life) and now requires action.



A DAY IN THE LIFE OF...

SENIOR PRACTITIONER OF CHILDREN & FAMILY SERVICES, LAURA FORTE



I am the Senior Practitioner in Children and Family Services with oversight of three projects – the Early Intervention Support Service (EISS) Belfast, the Independent Visitor (IV) Scheme, and the Independent Representation (IR) Scheme.

All these projects work with children, young people, and their families, however they are very different in how they operate, and each one has a different funder. I have been with NIACRO for three years now, I love my job and am lucky to work alongside some of the best teams in the organisation, if I do say so myself.

Currently I work two days in the office and three at home. During lockdown we welcomed Pippa, a one-and-a-half-year-old toy poodle, to our home and, needless to say, her favourite days are those when I am home-working and she can lie beside my desk and look out of the window.

I usually start my working day with a coffee whilst checking my emails (or pigeonhole) to see if anything has come in overnight. I double check my calendar to make sure I am prepared for any meetings I have that day – I will have at least one a day. As part of my role, I attend various Family Support Hub and Locality Planning Group meetings across Belfast, as well as various NIACRO groups, such as our Safeguarding and Wellbeing groups.

Normally I have a few EISS referrals waiting for me, so I spend some time checking their eligibility and making calls for further details, if necessary. I'll then upload their details onto the database and assign the case over to one of the three fabulous project workers on the EISS team. Referrers quite often email or call me in advance of sending referrals through, so I respond to these also.

Lynsey Buick is the Project Worker for the IV Scheme and we keep in contact about young people and volunteers on the project on a regular basis. We usually spend some time each day planning matches, troubleshooting, and making changes, if required. Recently we've had an overhaul of our promotional material and are in the middle of the recruitment and training of a new cohort of volunteers, so we spend some time planning for this.

At lunchtime if I'm working from home, I take Pippa for a short walk around the block after I've eaten which helps me avoid that post-lunch energy slump!

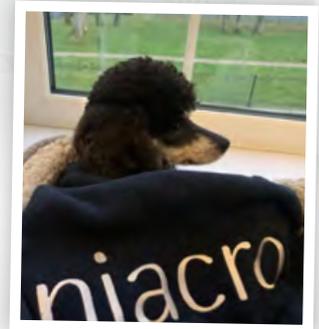
After lunch I might have a report that I need to work on for any of the three projects. I use the database to draw down any figures I need, and put these alongside a narrative to describe the fantastic work that has been going on in the project. At the moment, I am working on an evaluation for the 'CONNECT' project that we received a grant from the DFC Match Programme/Community Foundation. Their generous grant allowed us to carry out a residential with young people on the IV scheme, and to provide IT equipment for young people on our IR Scheme in Lakewood to use. Angela Adair (Project Worker for IR) and I normally chat a few times a week about activities for the centre, or any issues that are outstanding and need addressed with centre staff in her weekly communication with them.

If I take an afternoon coffee break, I usually spend it scrolling through Twitter, keeping an eye out for any good resources or training that is relevant to my projects. Although social media has many negatives, I also find that it's a great place to keep up to date with current trends and issues faced by young people.

I check in with the EISS team on a daily basis, so if we don't have a supervision or team meeting that day, we usually communicate via phone call or email. Two of the project workers on the team are new, covering maternity leave, so we have case discussions most days.

By the end of the day there might be one or two things that I need to run by my own line manager, Ciara Corrigan, so I'll either give her a call or send her a quick email with some project updates.

I'll end the day the way I've started it – consulting my calendar to make sure I'm prepared for anything I might have on the next day.



NIACRO WELCOMES JUDGMENT ON REHABILITATION OF OFFENDERS LEGISLATION

NIACRO supported the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) in its challenge to the law on the rehabilitation of offenders and welcomed a subsequent judgment from the Judicial Review Court.

In 2021, the Human Rights Commission had supported an individual in taking the Review proceedings in respect of the current law, which prevents any convictions of more than 30 months in prison from ever being spent.

In November of last year, we welcomed a judgment by the Judicial Review Court which found that the current law is disproportionate and incompatible with the applicants Article 8 Right to Private and Family Life under the European Convention of Human Rights.

NIHRC had argued that although there are certain circumstances where lifetime disclosure of a conviction may be necessary, the requirement that any conviction of over two and a half years in prison must always be disclosed, no matter what the circumstances and however long ago the offence was committed, was a breach of the right to privacy.

It also raised concerns that under the present legislation there was no review mechanism for past offenders, and that this was also incompatible with human rights. Our Chief Executive, Olwen Lyner, welcomed the judgment saying:

"Today's judgment brings us a step closer to making the necessary changes to the rehabilitation of offenders legislation in Northern Ireland. It paves the way for change for those who have an unspent conviction and to date have always had to disclose their conviction.

The consequences of a criminal conviction go far beyond the sentence imposed by a court. At NIACRO, we see first-hand the lasting impact having a record can have on individuals, who want to move on from their offence and move on with their lives.

People can face barriers to employment, education, housing, financial services and travel, all of which deny them the opportunity of a second chance.

People can, and do move on with their lives, and we see this every day in our work. We expect that today's ruling will now provide the opportunity to introduce the changes that will assist them in doing so."

Chief Commissioner of the NIHRC Alyson Kilpatrick, stated:

"The NIHRC welcomes today's judgment from the Court.

The NIHRC hopes that this judgment will help to progress changes to rehabilitation of offenders legislation in Northern Ireland. The current law prevents the applicant from becoming a rehabilitated person, regardless of their circumstances, as their convictions can never become spent.

"The Department of Justice has commenced a process of possible reform on the rehabilitation period in Northern Ireland. The NIHRC has responded to the consultation and will continue to monitor its progress in light of this judgment."



LORD MAYOR MEETS NIACRO

NIACRO's Chief Executive Olwen Lyner and Director of Operations Fiona Greene recently met with the Lord Mayor of Belfast, Kate Nicholl, to discuss the work we do in improving the lives of those who come into contact with the criminal justice system. The Lord Mayor then paid a return visit to NIACRO just before Christmas and met with our Women's Group, who are women who have previously offended. Together with the Mayor they discussed life, support for women in & out of the justice system and how best to make a pom-pom!



Using digital technology to help people with a second chance in life

Setting up work placements for people in high security prison is exceptionally challenging. So, we decided to use Virtual Reality to get those experiences into prisons. That's how SITE IT was born.

SITE IT is an immersive learning experience delivered through virtual reality on Oculus headsets. It assesses learner's skills and knowledge against a Level 1 qualification in construction site health and safety, taking learners through tasks testing health and safety, manual handling and working safely at heights.

The interactive tool is great for engaging people keen to work in construction but who may lack work experience and the required qualifications.

We worked with partners Sentireal, a software company specialising in software applications using cutting edge immersive technologies of Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality and the Construction Industry Training Board for Northern Ireland (CITB): whose role is to promote and improve training, skills and productivity in the construction industry.

With the support of the NI Prison Service and HMP Maghaberry's Learning and Skills contractor, we were successful in an application to our funder, the UFI VocTech Trust in 2020.



As a result of COVID-19, our plans to test the application with people in prison had to be adapted, but we completed testing with software students, industry experts, NIACRO staff and people we support in community.

Although COVID-19 brought with it significant challenges, we are very pleased that this employability tool is ready to help people into employment. We believe it will help create equality of opportunity for people in prison to develop skills and experiences that will prepare them for jobs in construction.

We're excited about getting it into the prisons and developing this immersive learning tool further, both for people in prison and in community across Northern Ireland and beyond.

Check out our short film about the award winning project on our You Tube channel: youtu.be/Rk1n1TeeYgs



A smile and a listening ear can make all the difference

In October 2019, NIACRO took over the Visitor Centres contract and we now run all three visitor centres at Magilligan, Maghaberry and Hydebank. Mandy Corr, our Contracts Manager, shares how our service supports families of prisoners at a time that can be very isolating.

"Families can drop into the centres before or after a visit and we can offer help and support.

The centres have a small tea bar where you can buy refreshments – tea, coffee, sandwiches, crisps, cold drinks and chocolate are available to purchase. We aim to make the visitor centre a warm welcoming environment where people can feel free to talk to staff about their experiences. Our staff also facilitate child-centred visits where the children get to spend family time with the person in prison.

"If it's your first time to visit prison, it's a good time to call in with us as we can talk you through the process of visits so that you know what to expect. Staff in the centre can also help you with any booking issues you may have. The crèche facility in the visits halls is also run by our staff and this gives the children somewhere to go for a bit of time out away from the busy hall. They can also take toys and games to the tables to play with.

"We run monthly family support forums, where family members come together at Hydebank and support each other through their shared experiences. These are a real lifeline for some families.

"Our vision for the centres, moving forward, is that they become a real hub for family support and information. We will be bringing community organisations into the

centres to inform people of the support they can gain in their own communities.

"For me, the visitor centres are a place where families can feel at ease and can discuss what they are going through and to receive the support and information they need. Each person we meet is going through a situation they never thought they would be in so just knowing that someone understands, and cares, means a lot to them. Visiting prison can be a frightening experience for most people so a smile and a listening ear can sometimes make all the difference."

Thank you

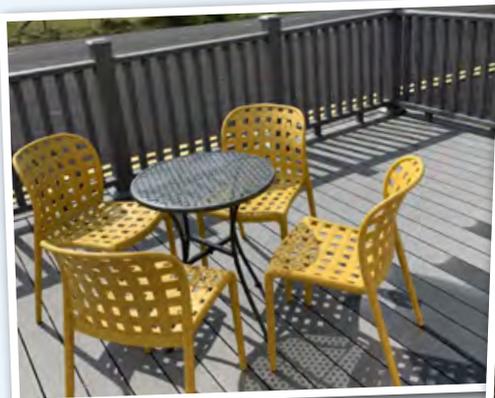
I am writing to commend the work of the Magilligan Visitors Centre team, each of the team members make their own contribution to supporting and serving all visitors.

I was blessed to receive this care and attention at each visit, as did my husband. They were, and are, a light glowing in what can be a dark place.

I also had occasion to receive advice from Barry McMullan. He was such a professional and caring. The advice he provided helped me steer the confusing paths of benefits and insurance.

Many thanks for the services your organisation provides.

Warm Regards,
Carol



Investing in Children Award

As we went to print, we were delighted to hear that Niacro has been re-accredited with the Investing In Children Award – a really positive end to the busy period reviewed in this issue.



The award recognises that we strive to put children and young people at the centre of how we design our services and was made after a comprehensive assessment process.

A key part of the assessment was the evidence provided by those whose voices are most important – the children and young people themselves. Our Children and Families Services Manager Ciara Corrigan summed it up perfectly - “we’re so happy to get the award, but what matters is what is behind getting the award – we listen and we act on what the children and young people tell us and that is how we try to make life better for them”. The quotes below from some of the young people we support certainly seem to agree.

They listen to us and make us feel like we have a right to be heard.

The young people we work with may be living in residential care, struggling at school, at risk of or involved in anti social activity, or may have a family member in prison - so what sort of thing do we listen to and act on and how does this help? One of the young people we work with had asked for a residential event to be organised - this is now an annual event which allows groups of young people with shared experiences to come together.

It’s important for your mental health, to know each other and our similarities.

Another young person was helped with finding coping strategies for managing their emotions and improving communication.

It was a really hard time in my life, I was angry a lot. My life’s now so much better and it’s been so good for my difficulties

The Investing in Children Award is good news for the organisation and for those we work with. We won’t rest our laurels though, we will continue to build on these success stories and make sure our children and young people are engaged and listened to at every juncture.

Pictured below with the certificate are Bronagh McErlean, Ciara Corrigan, Emma Digney and Laura Forte.



In the last year we have responded to the following consultations:



- Rehabilitation of Offenders Legislation
- The Development of an Adult Restorative Justice Strategy
- Consent to Serious Harm for Sexual Gratification: Not a Defence
- Proposals to Amend the Legislation Governing the Retention of DNA and Fingerprints in Northern Ireland
- Enhancing Legal Protections for Victims of Domestic Abuse
- Victims and Witness Strategy and establishment of Victims Commissioner for Northern Ireland
- Strategic Framework for Transitioning Youth Justice for Northern Ireland
- Empowering Change in Women's Lives: Strategy for supporting and challenging women and girls in contact with the justice system
- Establishment of a Regional Care and Justice Campus for Children and Young People
- Proposed amendments to the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015



- Draft Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031
- 'Making Life Better – Preventing Harm & Empowering Recovery: A Strategic Framework to Tackle the Harm from Substance Use'



- Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland: Skills for a 10x economy



- Ad Hoc Committee consultation on the Creation of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland
- Justice Committee Call to Evidence: Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill



- Programme for Government Draft Outcomes Framework
- Draft Consolidated NI COVID Recovery Plan



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